



Social justice and evangelization

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Interview with Cardinal Peter Turkson

ST. PAUL, Monday, November 8, 2010 (ZENIT.org).-The the challenge of serving as the voice of Benedict XVI in matters of “justice and peace” must be overwhelming. It requires the application of time-proven principles to a vast number of topics in many different geographical, political and cultural situations.

Often, solutions to difficult problems that might make sense in a context would be rejected in others, in different parts of the world, as reckless or ill-conceived.

But according to the new head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, we must strive to understand the difficult terms and ideas from the speaker's point of view. In other words, we have to ask ourselves what the speaker is trying to communicate to his particular audience.

Adopting this starting point can also promote a deep learning experience within us, says Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, a position for which he was appointed by Benedict XVI in October 2009.

Cardinal Turkson, aged 62, was born in Nsuta Wassaw (Ghana) and is Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Coast. He attended the St. Anthony-On-Hudson Seminary in New York and then studied at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, where he completed a doctorate in Sacred Scripture.

Ordained in 1975, he was appointed archbishop of Cape Coast in 1992, and cardinal, by John Paul II, in 2003.

On a recent trip to Minnesota, cardinal Turkson sat down with ZENIT to discuss, among other issues, the difficulties in understanding and applying the social doctrine of the Church, the importance of solidarity, and the vital work of the Holy See in United Nations.

The second part of this interview will be published tomorrow Tuesday, November 9th.

-As head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, you have to be aware of a lot of different issues, from the economy to the environment. What are your main sources of inspiration for dealing with this task? Cardinal Turkson: Basically, there are three influences. The first is Pope Benedict XVI himself. He, of course, is the reason I'm in Rome.

I have asked you what your vision and your goals are for the office because the nature of my work is to support the Pope's vision.

The second is my job as a pastor. Before I came to Rome, I was a shepherd. My pastoral experiences have been a reference. It's a rich particular source for my work.

I find myself coming to this office with a lot of pastor's feelings. I have to be creative, innovative and show initiative in any situation that I find.

The third source of inspiration is my training in Scripture. In the end, everything related to our faith in action is ultimately derived from Scripture. I find that a very useful preparation.

I was not a particularly brilliant student in the social doctrine of the Church -I did not do any academic studies on it, only what I needed for my pastor's work. So great support for my work is the biblical basis of everything that happens.

-What is Benedict XVI's vision of his office?

Cardinal Turkson: My appointment took place after the synod on Africa.

At the synod, the Holy Father said that in our work, we had to distinguish between pastoral action and political action, everything we do has to be in line with pastoral action.

For example, in the situation of Africa, all the important issues relating to human development, of some affecting governments, but we need to think about the pastoral situation.

The approximation to the political solutions has to be in line with our understanding of the Church as a family of God.

Anyone who knows anything about the life of a bishop or a priest in a country of the mission known that it is not just a pastor or an administrator; on the contrary, he makes every- architect, economic adviser, designer...

This means that we as pastors have to develop an acute sense of innovation, creativity, and initiative. Our work in the Council must be the same.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace is a department among many in the Vatican and therefore must be in line with the Pope. You have to talk like the Pope would when you represent the Pope.

-In the United States, there is a lot of confusion with the term “social justice”, some act as if it were a virtue or humanitarianism in general, and others who believe that the term should be completely abandoned because it has been distorted and kidnapped by leftist political activists. Can you clarify some of the confusion and define exactly what social justice means exactly?

Cardinal Turkson: In the background, social justice is a function of the faith itself and the doctrine of the Church.

A group of researchers from the United States recently came to Rome to visit us and talk about the recent encyclical.

It became apparent immediately in the discussion that certain terms, such as solidarity, are not appreciated by Americans, and are difficult to translate.

But there is a certain learning experience that is useful.

Just as we do in any literary study, it is always good to take into account the author and his starting point.

We have to understand the author's point of view and what the author puts on the table. Some terms and concepts cannot be appreciated unless they are seen from that point of view.

When it comes to social justice, it was an expression we used at the Synod of Africa a lot.

First, we must look at the term justice, and then add the adjective of social and see where it takes us. I think it's useful to get an idea of the expression itself.

Justice can be considered as the need to respect the demands of any relationship we encounter.

When I respect these relationships, I can be sure to be fair. This is true about the relationship between God and me, and it is true about husband and wife, student and teacher, owner and worker.

The demands of any relationship, when expected between the parties, constitute justice. If this is the case, if we refer to them in some way as social, it just means that we see a set of relationships and expectations among the members of society.

So this is neither conservative nor liberal. We will consider the demands of certain relationships in which we are involved, that is to say, the cause of justice.

We have to be careful not to be too theoretical. There is a relationship between the legislator and the citizen, between the carpenter and the worker, between bosses and business workers who must be carried out and respected.

Social justice is not so much about distribution or getting people up in society to help those below.

The starting point is to recognize the sense of justice in relationships and to be guided by it.

When we let ourselves be guided by it, it helps us to eliminate some of the difficulties in understanding the term.

We must look at social justice in terms of relationships.

-In the United States, there is much polarization in the way that politically active Catholics interpret and apply the social doctrine of the Church. For example, some believe that virtually all social problems should be resolved by individuals, organizations, and non-governmental actors, while others believe that the State should put its hand on virtually every problem it faces the society. Ensuring that all citizens have access to basic health services is just one example. What do you think about this polarization?

Cardinal Turkson: There could be a slight gap between the pope's teaching and the reality of the particular situation in the United States.

I am not sure that the debate on health is an attempt to put the pope's thought into practice in this regard.

The situation could probably be related to the two political camps within this country. In any case, he would have his hermeneutics.

If we think of the community character of the teaching of the Holy Father, it is based on the Christian anthropology of the person. The person is created to be part of a family. The family is the starting point of the understanding of the Holy Father of the person.

People belong to a family. Fraternity is a concept that is not well understood here.

As members of a family, we are all brothers and sisters along the way. This is the community starting point. We can pursue individual initiatives, but the original

starting point means that we should be aware of not leaving a brother or sister behind.

The logic of the Holy Father of the gift is applied here.

We do not leave a brother or sister behind, because we recognize what the person is: a being created in the image and likeness of God. Our solidarity with them is an expression of the love of God the Father for each one of us.

The person must imitate God's love for others. We must become love or gift for other people.

The point is that the human person must belong to a family. Solidarity is the basic point of departure: the brotherhood of men under the fatherhood of God.

I am not sure that the political discussion in American society has the same starting point.

Therefore, to make the understanding of the human person and the need for solidarity the starting point becomes a mission. We must use the social doctrine of the Church as a means of evangelization. We have to share this with non-Christians.

Any legislation that is adopted must be an expression of solidarity, an expression of the nature of God's love and the gratuitousness with which God loves and takes care of us.